



## United States Mission to the OSCE

### **Statement on Tolerance and Non-discrimination: Roma/Sinti**

As prepared for delivery by Erika Schlager, U.S. Helsinki Commission,  
to the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting  
Warsaw, September 28, 2005

Mr. Moderator, let me begin by thank the Romani non-governmental organizations here and the Office of the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti for the Romani-related side events that have been organized throughout the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. They have effectively mainstreamed Romani issues and enriched our work. I'd also like to encourage my colleagues here to see the exhibits on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor related to the Romani side events if they have not already done so.

Mr. Moderator, 2005 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, an event which has prompted a mix of celebration and introspection. This year is also the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of Copenhagen Document. Presaging truly historic changes, that groundbreaking document was the first international human rights agreement to recognize the human rights problems faced by Roma.

“The participating States clearly and unequivocally condemn totalitarianism, racial and ethnic hatred, anti-semitism, xenophobia and discrimination against anyone as well as persecution on religious and ideological grounds. In this context, they also recognize the particular problems of Roma (gypsies).”

*Excerpts from the Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE (1990)*

Since then, there have been many other “firsts.” The OSCE held its first seminar on Romani human rights issues in 1994. Among those present at that meeting were a Sinto survivor of the Holocaust and a young woman who had been widowed by the violence in Hadareni, Romania. In 1999, the OSCE appointed the first Romani advisor to the OSCE and in 2000 the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities published his seminal report on Roma. At the 2003 Maastricht Ministerial, the OSCE participating States adopted the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE area.

We deplore violence and other manifestations of racism and discrimination against minorities, including the Roma and Sinti. We commit ourselves to ensure that laws and policies fully respect the rights of Roma and Sinti and, where necessary, to promote anti-discrimination legislation to this effect. We underline the importance of careful attention

to the problems of the social exclusion of Roma and Sinti. These issues are primarily a responsibility of the participating States concerned. We emphasize the important role that the ODIHR Contact Point for Roma and Sinti issues can play in providing support. A further helpful step might be the elaboration by the Contact Point of an action plan of targeted activities, drawn up in co-operation with the High Commissioner on National Minorities and others active in this field, notably the Council of Europe.

*Excerpt from the Istanbul Summit Declaration (1999)*

Elsewhere in the OSCE region, other international organizations have also advanced the cause of human rights for Roma during the past 15 years. The first case in which a Romani plaintiff successfully brought suit before the European Court on Human Rights was decided in 1998. The Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights issued in 2003 an important report on sterilization without informed consent of Romani women in Slovakia and another report on the general situation of Roma this year.

Progress for Roma has been marked in many other ways. The U.S. Delegation is particularly heartened by the development of Romani news organizations, by the growth of grass roots Romani non-governmental organizations, and by the increasing political empowerment of Roma. Indeed, thanks to the participation of the first Romani Members of the European Parliament, that body adopted a resolution on Roma in April of this year that rightly identifies key areas where much work remains to be done.

The High Commissioner on National Minorities, in his 2000 report on the situation of the Roma and Sinti, observed that “. . . the rich diversity among Roma within the OSCE makes all but a few general conclusions inappropriate. One, however, is plainly warranted: discrimination and exclusion are fundamental features of the Roma experience.

“Ten years after the iron curtain fell, Europe is at risk of being divided by new walls.”

As if to underscore that point, this year began with a pogrom against Roma in the Siberian village of Iskitim, where an estimated 400 Roma were driven from their homes while the local authorities reportedly looked on. In a number of OSCE countries, such as Greece, continued evictions threaten to turn a new generation of Roma into unwilling nomads, and in Belgrade, community protests against municipal efforts to provide housing for Roma who currently live under a bridge illustrates the depth of prejudice Roma continue to face. In Bulgaria, Sofia municipal authorities demolished many unlawfully constructed houses in Roma neighborhoods on August 31, 2005. This action left hundreds of Roma homeless, and directly contradicted the government's 1999 Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society, which requires the legalization of the Roma neighborhoods and of the property in them. Six years after Bulgaria adopted the “Framework Program,” little has been done to implement it, and Roma and other minorities are still addressed under the demeaning rubric of “demographic issues.”

Mr. Moderator, several governments around this table are participating in the “Decade of Roma Inclusion.” It seems what we are really embarking on, 15 years after the Copenhagen Document, is a decade of rising Romani expectations. When governments adopt anti-discrimination legislation, Roma are right to expect it to be meaningfully implemented. And when the OSCE participating States adopt an Action Plan on Roma and Sinti, Roma are right to expect action. Mr. Moderator, I am reminded of what a Romani activist said at an OSCE meeting a few years ago: “We won’t be satisfied with a few state subsidies for folk festivals any more.”

At this juncture, there are a few areas where my delegation believes more concerted action would be constructive. First, national political leaders should speak out on Romani human rights issues. While we note the response of a relevant government agency to the anti-Roma manifestations at soccer matches in Bucharest in April, we regret that no senior political leaders in Romanian publicly condemned these acts. Moreover, the U.S. remains concerned by the phenomenon of political anti-Romism – the practice of appealing to anti-Roma prejudice as part of a political campaign. With local and national elections scheduled in the next year for several OSCE participating States with significant Romani communities, including Slovakia, we urge these States to take an active approach to combating this problem. We appreciate the comments from the delegate from Slovakia recognizing the desirability of increased Romani political participation.

Finally, governments should re-double their efforts to examine and revise outdated textbooks that either do not reflect Romani history at all or that include bigoted or prejudicial reflections of Roma. In this regard, it is particularly important that the experiences of Roma during the Holocaust are taught and remembered. The U.S. commends the Hungarian parliament for adopting a resolution on the Holocaust that acknowledges the crimes committed against Roma and Jews. We also commend the Czech parliament for hosting a photography exhibit about the Lety concentration camp this year.

Thank you.